

The nation and the ship /

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The frigate Minnesota, built in 1854, a participant during the Civil War in successful attacks on Hatteras Inlet and Fort Fisher, and a spectator of the famous conflict between the Monitor and the Merrimac, was sold July 17, 1901, to a mercantile company. The gift of the steering-wheel of the frigate to the Minnesota Historical Society was the occasion of the following lines.

Gift of the forest to the sea, Gift of a race to liberty, Whose sides in double onset bore The
flux of ocean and of war, We, far from war, remote from sea, Yet linked in sympathy with
thee By tie of name and bond of race, The records of thy deeds retrace.

When danger wrought its sombre spell And freedom dropped as Union fell, The cry rang
out for ships and crews And men and forests gave their thews. Sudden and swift the
change that passed; It felled the bole and reared the mast: What steadfast in the steadfast
clay Its listless years had drowsed away, Adrift, on sterner mission sent, Roamed on the
roaming element.

So nations that in peace and weal Have watched their patient decades steal, When
the sharp stroke their sinew tries, 99 Reel from their hoar securities, And toss upon the
currents rude Of terror and vicissitude.

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The riven earth its metal lent To forge her deadly armament; The hearth unto the deck
resigned The elastic form, the fearless mind: She bore in union sad and great Her human
and her iron freight. The sea beneath her chafed and sprayed; The guns within her shook
and brayed. As to and fro the pulses ran, Could beam of oak and breast of man The blent
and meeting tremors know From guns above and waves below. It suited Freedom's legate
well In Freedom's paradise to dwell, Where masts ascending sought on high Communion
with the vergeless sky, Where sail and hull no touch could find, No presence hostile to the
free, One, playmate of the unpinioned wind, One, fellow to the yokeless sea.

Through shine of hope and dusk of fear She ran her long and high career, And reached
in venerated age The sad and final anchorage. The grim years took her in their tow (What
victim will the years forego?) And she whom urgings of the gale And fury of the missile
hail, Whom fiercer blast and deadlier rain By brother sped for brother's bane Had harmless
swept, was borne away, The prize of time and of decay.

Her masters took the captor's part; They bore her to the grasping mart; 100 They bared
the hollowed palm to hold The sordid tale of bootless gold. The Union saw those fibres
rent Whose strength had been its own cement. Heard we no wailful message pass From
Fisher on to Hatteras, No signal from the livid track Trenched by the baffled Merrimac?
No voice was heard or none obeyed; Her years, her honors, vainly prayed; And friendship
shrunk not to bestow Less than the pity of a foe.

Ships own like men but transient lives, No oak subsists, no flesh survives; From other
masts must shine afar The flame stripe and the cusped star; To younger faith, to fresher
zeal Descends the rescued commonweal. O may that ardor still incline To purposes as
pure as thine! If darker errand e'er should guide Our cruisers o'er the wrathful tide, And
drops of fouler purple stain The girdled and the humbled main; Should peace revoke what
warfare gave, The sons of sires who loosed the slave Enchain the freemen,—if at last
(O base extinction of the past) Linked in imperishable tie Our honor in their freedom die:
Should we not feel thy uttered name Burn on our recreant lips like flame, And pause to

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list the nation's knell In each reproachful syllable? God grant high names may never lack
Voices as high to fling them back, Nor houseless memories seek in vain Hearts meet their
glories to contain! 101 Keep we our spirits fit to be The chapels of thy memory.

A truce to fear. Beside us lies A sign of blither destinies. Some ruth the trader's heart could
feel: He sold the hulk, but spared the wheel. We take the relic which he gave, Symbol of all
we ask and crave, The past's release, the future's debt, An omen, gage, and amulet. Sink,
if time bid, the stalwart frame; Fall, if fate will, the honored name; So fate and time forbear
to whelm The faith that shaped and swayed the helm, Stand but the guiding purpose firm,
The rest may glut the wave or worm. Through breed on breed of lusty sons The strong
incentive downward runs; Deed is progenitor of deed; The laurel hides the laurel's seed;
The steersman's trust in peace or war, The old ideal rears its star: The star above, the
helm below, The pilot steadfast 'twixt the twain, The turning wheel, the changeless glow—
Such may our people's course remain.